



OIST

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## REFLECTIONS IN DIVERSITY

# Challenging a Culture of Inequality

Progressive initiatives at a new Japanese academic institution tackle some deep-rooted gender inequities.

Síle Nic Chormaic

In the summer of 2011—shortly after I decided to relocate from Cork, Ireland, to the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST) Graduate University in Japan—I had lunch with an elderly Japanese professor at a scientific conference in Turkey. I remember that, as I talked with him about my future move, he laughed, and said incredulously, “This is a very unusual decision—not only are you going to be a foreigner in Japan, but you will also be a woman in physics! There are not many foreign, female physics professors in my country.”

Admittedly, until then I hadn’t completely grasped how problematic gender inequality can be in Japanese academia. But as someone who doesn’t shrink from a challenge, I found that the exchange with the professor just motivated me to dig deeper. What I’ve since absorbed

about the Japanese cultural contexts has indeed been enlightening. But perhaps the biggest lesson I’ve learned through joining a new, innovative Japanese university with active gender initiatives is that starting with excellent policies at the outset can make a substantial difference in gender equality.

### An out-of-place feeling

In September 2012, I embarked with several of my junior researchers and students on the journey from Cork to Okinawa, and on a new phase of our academic lives. I was fortunate that OIST Graduate University—established only the previous year, in November 2011—was very progressive in its hiring strategies; my husband and I had originally applied as a “two-body problem,” and the university offered both of us professorships. (In fact, the



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An example of one of the OIST Change posters (Sile Nic Chormaic is featured second from the left).

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45 full-time faculty members at OIST include three married couples, all recruited as dual hires.)

Yet I didn't necessarily find the same progressive attitude in Japan's larger physics community. During my first year there, I attended one of the Physical Society of Japan's spring meetings, an important event on the research calendar. In a conference hall with an audience of around 500 people, I spotted only four other women. An award ceremony for the best paper of the year by a junior researcher was taking place; the stage was filled with young male researchers and their male supervisors, uniformly wearing black suits and white shirts with ties. Eventually, a woman walked onto the stage to present the awards. This woman,

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however, was not a researcher—she was a “beauty queen” of the conference city, Hiroshima.

Feeling uncomfortable and out of place—more because I was a woman than because I was a foreigner—I sat in shock for several minutes. Then I decided to leave the meeting, with a strong belief that such behavior has to change for women ever to feel truly respected and treated with equality in the Japanese academic arena.

## Uphill struggle

Now, after five years in Japan, I can fully appreciate the uphill struggle faced by policy makers due to the traditional role of women in Japanese society. Women in Japan, unlike those in other developed nations, are often discouraged from entering full-time employment. Granted, some of the activities that I see around me strike a positive note: free child care at large society meetings; radical plans to ensure that fathers take leave at the birth of a child; incentives at a number of universities to increase the percentage of female faculty. Yet my talks with young high school and university students often paint a very different picture.

Since Master's and Ph.D.-level education in Japan is generally not free, parents do not always consider the investment for their daughters a wise economic decision, as it's assumed that they will stop working as soon as they

marry. The abundance of “women's universities”—a depressing throw-back in a modern society—do indeed provide education, but often tend to focus more on training women for traditional female roles within society. Such institutions also create a culture in which women entering the workforce have trouble finding an equal footing with male counterparts, having been segregated from them during their student lives.

## Moving the needle

As a new and growing private graduate university, with a five-year Ph.D. program that spans the sciences, OIST has an opportunity to make a real change in this problematic culture of gender separation and inequity. So how is the institution doing? Since the start of its first academic year in September 2012, the student body has grown to 134 persons, of whom 34 percent are female. The faculty stands at 45 full-time members, of whom nine, or 20 percent, are women. The university has a goal of 30 percent female faculty by 2020, and appears to be heading steadily in the right direction.

As in other institutions, female faculty still occupy largely junior positions. OIST's 9 female faculty members include 5 assistant professors, 1 associate professor, and 3 full professors; their 36 male counterparts include 10 assistant professors, 10 associate professors,



The OIST campus sits on the sub-tropical island of Okinawa.



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and 16 full professors. OIST is currently working to address this disparity—and, while there’s certainly room for improvement, this institution’s numbers are far better than the Japanese average of less than 10 percent female faculty in science and engineering.

OIST continues to support dual-career couples and families, regardless of employment level, with opportunities and guidance to employees and spouses on relocation to the subtropical island of Okinawa. Employment opportunities in high-tech fields on the island are limited, but OIST proactively provides solutions to those who face the eternal career-versus-family dilemma—and thereby encourages progressive changes throughout the Japanese academic environment.

A gender equality taskforce, established in OIST’s early days,

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presented a series of recommendations, such as the naming of a vice president for gender equality, to the campus’ executive team. A more visual form of outreach has been the campus’ “Change” poster series, now distributed to universities and institutes around Japan. And, in a larger sense, the hosting of events such as Gender Summit 10, which took place in Tokyo in May 2017, will surely help to move forward other policy and institutional changes throughout Japan, not just at OIST.

I compare the present Japanese academic environment to that of Germany in the 1990s, when I was a postdoctoral fellow in Garching bei München. In the 20 years since then, Germany has brought about significant changes. I’m quietly confident that Japan can also turn things around through radical initiatives, and I’m excited to be a part of the country’s growing number of female (and foreign) faculty. **OPN**

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## References

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